

RAM KARAN SHARMA

POETRY OF MAHĀBHĀRATA AND KĀLIDĀSA

Opening lecture

The central aesthetic sentiment of the *Mahābhārata* (MBH) is Peace (*Śānta*). All the vicissitudes, struggles of the Pāṇḍavas and Dhārtarāṣṭras lead to the spirit of peace and tranquillity and renunciation:

*yathā yathā (ca) viparyeti
lokatanham asāravat
tathā tathā virāgo 'tra
jāyate nā 'tra saiṁśāyaḥ ... / 2.174.4*

The poetry of the MBH is basically oral. It was originally recited or sung for the audience. The on-the-spot successive compositions were facilitated by a very large number of poetic formulas in the forms of vocatives, noun-adjective-combinations, similes and metaphors and other clauses forming parts of *pādas* or the entire *pādas*. So the poetry of MBH abounds in such poetic formulas with identical or slightly modified repetitions.

MBH poetry is characterized by stylistic simplicity. Long compounds are rare. Barring very few exceptions, the bulk of MBH poetry is endowed with Prasāda Guṇa.

A few illustrative poetic formulas of MBH imagery:

Tasthau girir ivā 'calaḥ 1.179.14
Tasthau sthāṇar ivā 'calā 1.68.20

<i>Rudras tārāmrgaṃ yathā</i>	3.262.19
<i>Devarājasamadyutiḥ</i>	1.61.62
<i>Vibhāvasusamadyutiḥ</i>	1.43.18
<i>Mattavāraṇavikramaḥ</i>	1.94.4
<i>Vyāttānanam ivā'ntakam</i>	6.55.45
<i>Vidyut saudāmanī yathā</i>	3.50.12
<i>Śukrāṅgārakayor iva</i>	6.43.54
<i>Gāvaḥ śītārditā iva</i>	6.45.58
<i>Śarāṃś cā śviṣopamān</i>	3.23.3
<i>Dvayoḥ sāgarayor iva</i>	6.1.24

The similes and metaphors of MBH are mostly collected from a wide range of the Vedic gods, nature, and items of material culture. Sometimes more than one synonym of one and the same object of comparison are used to emphasize a given attribute, e.g. *Kālāntakayamopama* - 3.23.30, *Vajrāśānisamasparśa* 6.114.55. Sometimes the same *upamāna-dharma* (Tertium comparationis) is denoted by several objects of comparisons in a compounded form, e.g. *tato gokṣīrakundendumṛnālarajataprabha* 3.21.30.

MBH itself claims:

*Itihāsottamād asmāj
Jāyante Kavibuddhayaḥ
pañcabhya iva bhūtebhyo
lokasaṃvidhayas trayāḥ* 1.2.237

This assertion is corroborated in the writings of major Sanskrit poets like Kālidāsa, Bhāravi, Māgha and Śrīharṣa.

But as far as I can see from the point of view of a stylistic study, Kālidāsa, comes closest to MBH.

Apart from the stylistic simplicity and elegance as found in Kālidāsa's aesthetic creations, there is a remarkable semblance with MBH similes and metaphors. E.G.

- i) *mṛgānusāriṇaṃ sākṣāt
Paśyāmi 'va pinākinam.
Abhijñānaśākuntala* 1.6
Cf. MBH 3.262.19

- ii) *mārgācalavyatikarākulite 'va sindhuḥ,*
sāilādhīrājatanayā na yayau na tasthau.
Kumārasambhava V.85
 Cf. MBH, 3.12.17
- iii) *tasthau sthāṇur ivā calaḥ.*
Abhijñānaśākuntala 7.11
 Cf. MBH 1.68.20
- iv) *bhakticchedair iva viracitām*
bhūtim ānge gajasya.
Meghadūta 18. (Pūrva)
 Cf. MBH 3.146.24

Kālidāsa is a poet of universal love – the union of love divine and love mundane. He is a poet of peace, nonviolence and interdependent cordial relations. He is a poet of ecological balance. He is a poet of victory without violence.

I have got a feeling that Kālidāsa is all the time conscious of the situations such as mutual distrust, overselfish ambitions of individuals, lack of spiritual and mundane discipline, disrespect for superiors, disrespect for women, favouritism, etc. leading to *Mahābhārata* war. So he repeatedly presents a picture of the opposites as if to educate his readers about an ideal, balanced and peaceful and happy life.

The Ring episode of the *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* is Kālidāsa's own innovation. We are all aware of the significant role played by the ring in bringing about union of the lover and beloved. What is specially mysterious in this context is the recovery of the ring through a fisherman from the womb of a fish. What could be the genesis of this aesthetic speculation?

As R.C. Hazra tells us (and there is every reason to believe that he is right) the tradition of story-telling of fishes and fishermen on the eighth day of Pāriplava during the Aśvamedha sacrifice constitutes the origin of MBH. Vyāsa's relationship with a fisherman's family and the role played by Vyāsa's mother Satyavatī the great grandmother of the Pāṇḍavas and Dhārtarāshṭras go to establish the predominance of fishes and fishermen in moulding the Central theme of MBH. So I think, a fisherman's appearance in Kalidasa's work, suggests Kālidāsa's intimate association with Vyāsakula. In any case this episode too is indicative of Kālidāsa's proximity to MBH.